

102\mislessons

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Virtually every important aspect of the Cuban Missile Crisis was lied about, concealed, mystified and/or misunderstood at the time and for the next quarter of a century.

Various "lessons" have been learned on the basis of this mass of misinformation and misunderstanding which are clearly, in retrospect, mistaken and seriously misleading.

That is to say that a generation of citizens and even elite decision-makers have been seriously misled in their understanding of vital political phenomena, foreign and domestic, by these deliberately mishapen "lessons."

There is strong reason to believe that the events of the crisis and the mistaken lessons drawn from selective and misleading accounts of it contributed directly to the massive nuclear arms race ensuing over the next quarter century and to the American decision to intervene massively, and the tactics it chose, in Vietnam.

To say this is to question the almost universal appreciation of the tactics and decision process in the Cuban Missile Crisis--whatever those truly were--as having led to an unequivocal "success"; and to raise the importance of discovering, at last, what those tactics and their immediate consequences really were, so as to counter disastrously misleading lessons and form others that are better guides to policy.

The earliest accounts of the decision process--seriously misleading in their selective omissions and misstatements--were by two participants, Schlesinger and Sorensen: two of the participants in the Kennedy School discussions.

Sorensen was the editor of RFK's posthumously released memoir (RFK's "draft" of this is lost or unavailable, raising the question of the actual relative degree of authorship of this important source--as in the case of "JFK's" Profiles in Courage, "drafted" by Sorensen). While this filled in some important gaps in the earlier accounts, it left other distortions uncorrected or reaffirmed.

The same is true of Elie Abel's account based on interviews with the participants, several of whom were at the Harvard symposia: in particular, McNamara and Bundy, who had also made public statements at the time that were seriously misleading.

Thus, to rely on the recollections and reflections of former participants like these--as the Kennedy School investigations do--is to rely on the interpretations of persons who not only have their own historical roles to defend but who have a past history



of actively distorting the record (not only where it concerns themselves) and who have that history to cover up as well.

Yet the transcripts of symposia and the commentaries released by the Kennedy School Project show no concern about this problem, or even any awareness of it. The rules of decorum at the Kennedy School apparently preclude questioning participants about contradictions between their accounts either now or earlier and newly-revealed evidence such as ExComm transcripts or declassified documents.

For example, all of these accounts (plus Graham Allison's, also based on interviews including these same people) make the crucial assertion that the ExComm unanimously [CHECK WORDING] rejected the Soviet proposal to trade Turkish and Cuban IRBMs on the morning of October 27: i.e., they chose, without reservations, to prolong the crisis, which was rapidly moving toward open hostilities, rather than to resolve it on these terms which, all purportedly agreed, were totally unacceptable. As McNamara put it most recently in the WGBH account of February, 1989 (taped earlier, but surely changeable up to release), it was "inconceivable" to the members of the ExComm that a public trade be accepted.

That assertion is false. McNamara knew it was false. And every member of the ExComm has known it to be false over the entire 27-year period since the crisis: or to be precise, since October 19, 1962, when McNamara himself asserted that such a trade was probably necessary, inevitable, and the most favorable outcome to be expected; or October 20, when President Kennedy implied that it was an acceptable subject for negotiations once the blockade had been instituted; or particularly, October 27, when President Kennedy repeatedly argued precisely for settling the crisis on this basis.

All this has been known since 1986, before the Harvard seminars, with the release of Excomm transcripts and minutes. Yet not once in the Kennedy School output does anyone raise this discrepancy, or question any of those who have maintained this deceit over a quarter of a century why they had done so, either initially or for so long. Nor does anyone address the question of the impact on public understanding--and that of subsequent officials in various countries--and perhaps on policy of this continued deception. (The implications are, in fact, varied, far-reaching, and of unusual importance).

The only implications of the new revelations--including that of Rusk in 1987, that JFK returned to this possible resolution of the crisis even after RFK had delivered an ultimatum to Dobrynin on the night of October 27--pursued in these discussions are those that are favorable to Kennedy. (Favorable, that is, from a dovish point of view, in keeping with the current spirit of

detente. Nitze and Dillon find the Rusk revelation dismaying, though they should hardly claim to be so surprised by it, in view of the October 27 transcript released earlier, giving the President's views as they had heard them directly. Again, the question of why the "Cordier ploy" had to be kept secret so long, and why at the time it was kept secret even from the ExComm fails to get the attention it deserves in these discussions.)

What is not explored includes the question of the actual level of risk during the blockade and the aerial reconnaissance, and the likelihood that, if Khrushchev failed to back down, an airstrike or invasion would have occurred despite Kennedy's reported reluctance to launch them and his willingness to consider a public trade.

This leads to the potentially embarrassing--hence (?) not explored--question: how justifiable was this level of risk, from October 22 on, and particularly its prolongation on October 27 (as recon planes were fired upon, and a SAC U-2 wandered over the Soviet Union), given the newly-revealed reality that a resolution on the basis of a public trade was not at all "inconceivable" in the eyes of the President himself?